

that fabric. The minimalist repeat is set against the repeat of floral print; the effect is nearly, but never truly, baroque. Instead, what is in play here are the mannerist tendencies of (early) postmodernism. The "Old Mill" paintings, particularly, are troubling; in taking on a figure as iconic as Stella, and retaining that iconic character, their historical sense amounts to blunt, clumsy citation, and for all that, too late.

Equally troubling is another political aspect in, or perhaps around, the work. Tap makes the claim that the project is a feminist enterprise, particularly in the resurrection of the overlooked Rachel Ruysch. The fact is that the floral motifs here are so abstracted as to render any filiation to Ruysch's works impossible; moreover, her name is never mentioned in any title. It would do to re-examine, say, the Pattern and Decoration Movement for an explication on the way in which formal means can have political ends. The paintings in "Arrangements," as they stand, are very good at being what they are: investigations of the properties of decoration. ♦

Monica Tap, "Arrangements," Douglas Uddell Gallery, Edmonton, February 15 to March 1, 1997.

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## VISUAL ART

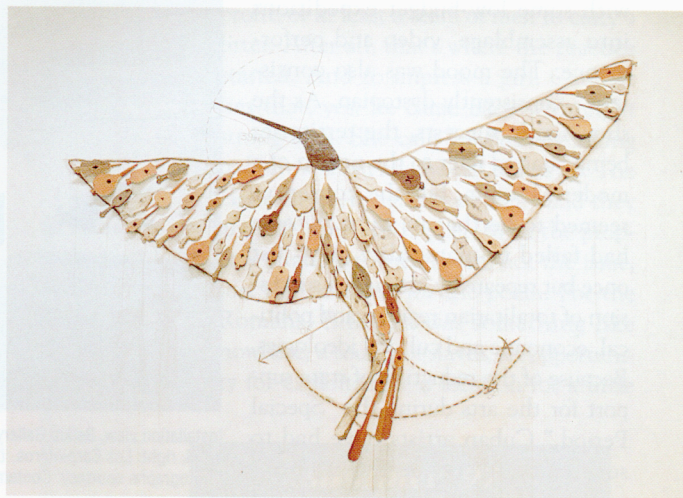
### Territorial Declaratives

by Robin Laurence

Some days, inspiration seems like a fragile flower. Other days, it's more like a sturdy bloom, enduring wind and rain and unseasonal snow flurries. Enduring even the most drastic transplantations into foreign soils and unfriendly climates. "New Art from Cuba: Utopian Territories," an ambitious exhibition of works by 23 artists, organized by four curators, and displayed this past spring in six of Vancouver's public galleries and artist-run centres, was one such transplantation. But even before it made the long trip from sunny Havana to rainy Vancouver, its

young artists—most of them still in their 20s—had established their practices within an environment of considerable adversity. Their context was and is one of social change, economic hardship, material shortages, government censorship, and virtual abandonment by a previous generation of artists. The show's curators reported that a number of artists who had come to prominence during the "Cuban Renaissance" of the 1980s left the country after the 1989

withdrawal of Soviet support for the Cuban economy. The "Special Period" of austerity in Cuba which occurred after the Soviet pullout (and which still prevails), the dual economy which has evolved (the capitalist/dollar economy alongside the socialist/peso economy), as well as a government campaign of "rectification" and increased censorship, have shaped the conditions in which young Cuban artists must work. Inflecting all of this is their determination to remain in Cuba.



Los Carpinteros, *Flying Pigeon*, 1995.

Although inconsistent in quality, "Utopian Territories" manifested a consistently satirical energy, a strong feeling for materials (especially those that are recycled and distressed), the work of the hand, and a commitment to finding both contingent and ambiguous ways to declare itself. Means and mediums were mostly low-tech (a function of limited resources and scarce materials) and included paintings, block prints, black and white photographs, mixed-media installations and sculpture,

Los Carpinteros, *Marquilla Cigarreira Cubana*, 1993.





with some low-budget expeditions into assemblage, video and performance. The mood was also consistent—consistently dystopian. As the show's title suggests, the territories being charted refer to the notion of a modern Utopia, but the consensus seemed to be that in Cuba, Utopia had failed to materialize. Not just once but repeatedly, through a succession of totalitarian regimes and political, economic and cultural ideologies. Because of the reduction of state support for the arts during the "Special Period," Cuban artists have had to seek markets outside the country, while continuing to work and live there. Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, one of the show's two Cuban curators, told me that Cuban artists have had to abandon the more "romantic" attitude that prevailed in the '80s for a much more pragmatic relationship to the market.

Cultural identity has been an important theme in Cuban art since the avant-garde work of the 1920s, "But right now," Valdés added, "the artist is concerned with making a reformulation of identity discourse." (Transcribing my interview with Valdés and reading the introduction to the yet-to-be-printed catalogue, it occurred to me that artspeak has become a new *lingua franca*, a kind of postmodern Esperanto.) Such "reformulated" discourse manifested itself in the form of self-portraiture in the work of five photographers at the Charles H. Scott Gallery: Juan Carlos Alom, Abigail Gonzalez, Cirenaica Moreira, René Peña and Marta Maria Pérez. Although Pérez's images of herself, sleeping and dreaming, possessed an ironic geniality, the photos of the others were, on the whole, dark, dangerous and confrontational: images of blades and daggers, dead birds and dismembered dolls, human-animal hybrids, anti-bourgeois postures and sexual-religious provocations.

Moreira depicted herself draped in a Cuban flag and cloaked in her own long, dark hair, with knitting needles poised menacingly against her temples. More evocative, though, was an image of a single anthurium flower from the same "Lobotomy" series. The flower's dark and waxy bract bore a long incision, which had been stitched up with coarse thread—creating an image of drastic intervention followed by crude repair. The metaphor of



Installation view, Belkin Gallery, left: Fernando Rodriguez, *La poda necesaria*, 1996, right: Los Carpinteros, *La dirección de la mirada*, 1996. Photographs courtesy: Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

the surgical incision and subsequent scar—psychic, social and sexual—resonated through many bodies. In another imagistic vein, Manuel Piña's minimalist photo-installation at Artspeak, *(de)constructing utopias* (Tribute to Eduardo Muñoz) functioned as both a critique of and a lament for the *Microbrigadas*, a volunteer construction program that failed to deliver promised housing to needy Cubans. Piña sees the *Microbrigadas* as the last Utopian project of the Cuban Revolution, and a considerable melancholy emanated from the fading, yellowing and curling prints he had made from Muñoz's negatives. The artist's selective appropriation, aging, recombination and mounting of these photo-journalistic fragments also served to deconstruct their modernist/Utopian impulse, and corresponded to what the curators described as an "aesthetics of frustration." (Contemporary Cuban art, they said, has placed itself "at the crossroads between the scepticism of postmodernism and the local particulars of a specific historical circumstance.")

A complicated idealism also prevailed in Tonel's three installations at the Or Gallery. Two of them, the ambitious *Self-Portrait as an Organic Intellectual* and the smaller *Fire and Smoke*, created a fictional identification between the artist and Antonio Gramsci, the leftwing theoretician and founder of the Italian communist party, who died in 1937—long before Tonel was born. Before the Cuban Revolution was born, too. *Self-Portrait* consisted of a room within a room—the inner space constructed out of rough, stained and splintered wood planks—with a caged table-saw at its centre. The enclosing

nature of the installation alluded to the 11 years Gramsci spent in prison, and the work's individual elements recollected the writings he completed there, as well as those of other cultural theorists, like Brecht. The saw seemed to have an "organic" relationship to the room's wooden planks, bearing metaphorically on Gramsci's theories about the intellectual's "organic" relationship to the proletariat.

Over the tops of the wooden walls and through small windows cut into the planks, one could view fragments of a variety of drawn, painted, sculpted and photographic images (some with text) mounted on the gallery walls. Here the artist's identification with Gramsci was curious and ambiguous—and slightly comical. (Tonel's disturbing depictions of headless female figures seemed at odds with other aspects of his installation, but also seemed to speak to a particular condition of powerlessness. Not incidentally, male artists far outnumbered female artists in this show, and gay artists weren't represented at all.) Again, despite Tonel's sincerely admiring tribute to Gramsci, a dystopian mood prevailed. It seemed to encompass the failure of the socialist project in Cuba, the privatization of contemporary Cuban art production, and the removal of the artist from the street to the studio. In this way, it raised issues of alienation and social irrelevancy.

Another elaborate identification occurred in the work of Fernando Rodriguez, who claimed to be manifesting the vision of a fictional folk artist named "Francisco de la Cal." The artist is said to have gone blind in the early days of the Cuban Revolution. On view at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Rodriguez's carved and painted wooden plaques and mixed media installation combined feelings of "ardor and idealism" for Fidel Castro and the Revolution with a sense of absurdity, disillusionment and disruption of the natural order of things. (The absurdity included a depiction of Castro's marriage to the patron saint of Cuba, the Virgin de la Caridad or Ochun, and an impossible snowstorm over their honeymoon *cabaña*.)

Other works on view at the Belkin Gallery revealed a fearless love of craft and of physical engagement with objects



## BOOKS

## Running Out from Nowhere

by James Hutchison

According to Catullus ("Varus me meus ad suos amores..."), when the poet returns to Rome after a year in Bithynia, now part of Turkey, none of his friends can believe he hasn't come back with a considerable

profit, or at least a team of men to carry a litter. After all, that's where the practice started. And to impress a girl, Catullus lies that, yes, he came back with eight strong men. She calls his bluff by asking to borrow them and he has to fess up. The eight slaves, imaginary or real—and they are real, they just happen to be the property of another friend—are not the issue, just the occasion for the poem. For the Romans, Bithynia was something like nowhere, a source of slaves, an opportunity for exploitation, a location for a little

and materials. Painting, woodworking, plaster-casting, woodblock printing, all made allusions to the development, disappearance and reclamation of historic, political and folk art forms—and to kitsch. (As Scott Watson writes, "The problem of the past, of what from the past constitutes the heritage of national identity, is a subtext of much contemporary Cuban art.")

The artists' collective known as *Los Carpinteros* (The Carpenters) created elegantly ironic paintings in extravagant, carved wooden frames, combining past aspects of Cuban artisanship with present aspects of Cuban life. Abel Barroso created a "clothesline" installation of woodblock prints, backed by assemblages of the blocks themselves. His work, *Dirty Laundry Should Be Washed at Home*, told a sardonic, economic history of Cuba through allusions to popular and political art forms and motifs, and with a particular and painful reference to paper money.

Other artists at the Belkin Gallery addressed a number of sombre themes, including Afro-Cuban religion and government surveillance; the artist's place in the community; the hardships of the Special Period and the American economic embargo; the tragic loss of life in the desperate migrations from Cuba to Florida; the residue of the Soviet presence on the island; and the consequences of colonial slavery and post-colonial tourism. As with much else in this big show, a collective mood emerged—and a series of collective dilemmas. Utopian aspiration versus dystopian actuality, historicity versus change, social concern versus individual expression—all seemed to suggest how difficult it is to be an artist in Cuba right now. It also confirmed the determination of this group of realistic utopians to carry on. ♦

"New Art from Cuba: Utopian Territories," curated by Juan Antonio Nolina, Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, Keith Wallace and Scott Watson, was on at Access, Artspeak, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Contemporary Art Gallery, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and the Or Gallery, in Vancouver, from March 21 and 22 to various end dates in April and May.

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## summer '97

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The Dreamer and The Dream  
Paintings and Drawings from the Estate  
May/June

## MICAH LEXIER

In The Viewing Room  
A Minute of My Time: New Steel Works and Works on Paper  
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New Works  
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